

Sin and Divine Punishment

The Korean Series JIOK (HELLBOUND, KR 2021–), New Religious Movements, and a World Full of Guilt

Abstract

The TV series JIOK (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021–), internationally known as HELLBOUND, is a recent and highly successful series that has been available on the streaming platform Netflix since November 2021. It is usually described as a “dark mystery thriller” or “dark fantasy film”, which points to the general tone but also to its constant interplay with the “mysterious”. The plot revolves around the appearance of monstrous creatures who suddenly arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way. All of those who are killed in this heinous manner have received a warning beforehand, delivered by “angels” foretelling their fate and their imminent death and introducing crucial topics such as “guilt” and “sin” as a reason for the whole procedure. The article introduces major topics of this series and focusses on the prominent role of a new religious movement that is intimately linked to major trajectories of the plot.

Keywords

South Korea, TV Series, New Religious Movements, Christianity in East Asia, HELLBOUND

Biography

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Introductory Remarks: A New Korean Hit

The TV series *JIOK* (*HELLBOUND*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021–) – the Korean *jiok* means *hell* – is a recent and highly successful streaming series that has been available on Netflix since November 2021.¹ Its pilot episode premiered in September 2021 as the first Korean drama to be part of the Toronto International Film Festival, which proved to be the starting point for an impressive international reception. The series even surpassed the phenomenal success of the better-known Korean series *OJING-ŏ GEIM* (*SQUID GAME*, Hwang Tong-hyŏk, KR 2021), which had been released only two months earlier, and even crushed the 10-year reign of *GAME OF THRONES* (HBO, USA 2011–2019) as the most watched video content on the YouTube platform.² *HELLBOUND* became the world’s most-watched Netflix series only one day after its release,³ which was probably intrinsically connected to the preceding *SQUID GAME* craze⁴ and the general interest in the Korean film and series industry that had grown substantially and on a global level at least since the 1990s.⁵

The series’ origins are in a popular webtoon (a specifically Korean way of publishing comics, or *manhwa*, on the Internet and not in a printed form that has become extremely popular)⁶ by Yŏn Sang-ho (b. 1978), who is also responsible for the streaming version. Yŏn is a well-known figure in the Korean entertainment industry⁷ and responsible for some internationally acclaimed works, such as the animated films *TWAEJIŬI WANG* (*KING OF PIGS*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2012), the first Korean film ever screened at the Cannes Festival, and *SAIBI* (*THE FAKE*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2013), which made it to the Toronto International Film Festival, and above all for the zombie horror thriller *PUSAN HAENG* (*TRAIN TO BUSAN*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2016), which was an immensely popular and commercial hit in South Korea and beyond.⁸

1 See <https://www.netflix.com/at/title/81256675> [accessed 6 July 2023].

2 See the overview in Kim/Park 2023, 455–456; on the relation of the South Korean film industry to the Netflix company see Kasten 2021.

3 Noh 2022.

4 See early reviews in Burke 2021; Ishak 2021.

5 Chua/Iwabuchi 2008; Jin 2016; Yecies/Shim 2021.

6 For an introduction and the history of the webtoon genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 1–48; see also Jin 2023. On the original *Hellbound* webtoon see <https://koreanwebtoons.fandom.com/wiki/Hellbound> [accessed 6 July 2023].

7 For Yŏn Sang-ho’s importance in the creation and popularization of the webtoon genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 122–123.

8 Gardener 2021; Austin 2020, 9–12. The most recent production by Yŏn is the science-fiction

Major characteristics of Yŏn’s earlier films, which all have a certain darkness and an obvious penchant for the catastrophic, are also relevant for HELLBOUND. It is usually introduced as a “dark mystery thriller” or “dark fantasy film”,⁹ which points not only to its general tone, but also to its constant interplay with the “mysterious”. This description stems from aspects of the plot and the content often remaining largely unexplained. This is certainly the case, at least in the episodes of the first season available so far.

This article interprets aspects of the series within a wider cultural and religious context by focussing on the role of religion. One of the most interesting aspects of this series is that a recently established religious community plays a crucial role. New religious movements are a major characteristic of the East Asian religious landscape, for they have developed in great number since the nineteenth century. This topic has been picked up by the film industry, not least on account of its often spectacular implications for both society and the individual. As will be shown, the portrayal of the new religious scenery in HELLBOUND has parallels with some recently released Japanese films, but it also bears striking differences.

Encountering Creatures from Hell: Characteristics of the Plot

The starting point of the series and the trigger for all the events is the mysterious appearance of fierce monstrous creatures (fig. 1) who arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way, literally annihilating them at the end of the “demonstration” (as the ruthless slaughter is called). All of those who are killed in this heinous manner have received prior warning. This notice is delivered by “angels” who foretell their fate and their imminent death, introducing crucial topics such as “guilt” and “sin” as reasons for the whole procedure.

This all takes place in Seoul in 2022, and these breath-taking happenings are intrinsically connected to a new religious movement that profits from these events. The movement is called New Truth (*saejilli*) and had been founded 10 years earlier but remained rather unsuccessful as nobody was

film JUNG_E (KR 2023), which received mixed or average reviews but initially was also a major Netflix hit.

9 Such characterizations are found in newspaper and Internet reviews; see, for instance, Burke 2021; Ishak 2021; or entries in web encyclopaedias such as [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellbound_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellbound_(TV_series)) [accessed 6 July 2023].



Fig. 1: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:03:08): One of the monstrous creatures appearing out of nowhere in full combat mode.

interested in the founder’s prophecies. With these recent events his message is noted and appreciated by a growing number of people: the emergence of the monsters, referred to as “executors”, is part of God’s plan to make humanity responsible for its misdeeds. The growing success of the movement is also a result of its innovative advertising and strategy for growth: New Truth’s main representative appears on the Internet in a flashy environment where he presents his message in a seemingly infuriated, highly aggressive manner (fig. 2). He interacts intensively and professionally with his audience via various social media platforms. Eventually, after a long period of unsuccessful proselytization attempts, he becomes the centre of attention because his earlier predictions have been fulfilled.

The New Truth movement, though, is not the sole actor in this regard. An additional group, called “arrowheads” (*hwasalch’ok*), a kind of elite split-off within New Truth, takes radical measures and physically attacks everyone who dares criticize New Truth. Naturally, the state authorities are also part of the story. One of the police inspectors is soon involved on a personal level, as he comes to realize that his daughter is part of, or at least highly attracted to, the movement. This element is linked to an additional subplot,



Fig. 2: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 2 (00:18:28): the head of the new religious movement in his flashy online appearance and in full social-media interaction with his audience.

as the inspector's wife had been killed years earlier, and the daughter is able to identify and kill her mother's murderer with the help of the founder of New Truth.

After describing the foundational events of 2022, the series' plot makes a leap into 2027. As a result of the developments described above, i.e. the "demonstrations" that took place, New Truth has become more and more popular and has gained a substantial membership. Its "priests" are important figures in society and highly active in publicly denouncing the "sinners" who are bound for their final punishment. The current first season of the series ends with another plot evolving in this disastrous environment, which includes groups that try to oppose the growing importance and influence of the New Truth organization. In addition, a couple of figures from the first part are still active, which points to major plot trajectories that might evolve in the next season, announced for 2023.¹⁰

As this outline of the plot shows, the series has a rather elaborate structure, with various layers of time and figures who change as events evolve. The leap from 2022 to 2027 gives an opportunity to increase the tension, as the new period introduces a totally new structure related to the rise of the New Truth movement. It also raises questions about what happened to characters from the first period and how their fates are interwoven. The leitmotifs are guilt and sin, which are at the centre of both the plot and major dialogues. The theological stance of New Truth suggests sin is a general problem that affects all human beings but is focused on individuals who sinned "evidently". In honing in on certain figures, the series opens up opportunities to explore the nuances of entanglements with guilt on an individual level. We see this clearly in the case of the inspector (officially responsible for the detention of those guilty under the law and for ensuring they are punished) and his daughter: both struggle with the murder of their wife/mother and become involved in a labyrinthine relationship with the head of the mysterious religious movement, who deems himself responsible for "sin" in the religious and theological sense of the word. Some of the aspects, namely of the plot, though, tend to overstress the topic of sin.

Later episodes of this series may resolve these many tensions and intricate twists. In comparable cases, extremely convoluted plots like that in *HELLBOUND* have become a burden, with series having to end with "mysteri-

10 See the announcement on <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/hellbound-season-two-announcement> [accessed 7 July 2023].

ous” or deus-ex-machina finales (as was the case in the US-American series *THE LEFTOVERS* [Mimi Leder, US 2014–2017]) or be suspended (as was the case with the series *MESSIAH* [Michael Petroni, US 2020]).

Many parallels are evident in a comparison with the plot of *SQUID GAME*, including the rather critical stance towards popular Christianity-related issues¹¹ such as the Prosperity Gospel, so important in South Korea.¹² *HELLBOUND* similarly describes an apocalyptic environment and deals with issues usually related to the final days of humanity, which is threatened by previously unimagined powers. In this regard, the series also has parallels with the already mentioned series *THE LEFTOVERS*, since the latter is also about how to cope with an unforeseen and unexpected “divine” (or at least super-human) intervention¹³ that forces a confrontation with crucial human questions such as mortality, sin, and justice.¹⁴ The same also applies – although on a different level – to the film adaptations of the highly successful *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye (1926–2016) and Jerry B. Jenkins (born 1949), where the New Testament’s *Apocalypse of John* is used as a script for a meticulously drafted and detailed description of the end of the world in modern times (*LEFT BEHIND: THE MOVIE*, Vic Sarin, CA 2000/2001; *LEFT BEHIND: THE TRIBULATION FORCE*, Bill Corcoran, US/CA 2002; *LEFT BEHIND: WORLD AT WAR*, Craig R. Baixley, US/CA 2005).¹⁵

All these philosophical and religious “big” questions contrast with the dazzling media environment, which drives forward the series and links back to its origins in a webtoon.¹⁶ One of the “demonstrations” becomes the centre of an enormous media craze that is intensively promoted by the new religious movement: a person who has received a prophecy is paid an immense sum of money for giving media representatives an opportunity to watch its fulfilment live (fig. 3).

11 On the references to and the implicit criticism of some aspects of Korean Christianity see Bosman 2022.

12 Suh 2019, 564–569; for a portrayal of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, an important Christian movement with this agenda that was founded in 1958 by Cho (David) Yong-gi (born 1936), developed into the biggest Pentecostal church in South Korea, and also has a worldwide presence, see Kim, Hui-yeon 2018, and also, more critical, Anderson 2003.

13 Northover 2021.

14 Front 2021; Dulong 2020.

15 On this series and its importance for contemporary religious culture in the United States see Frykholm 2004; Forbes/Kilde 2004; Standaert 2006. In spite of the overall success of the book series, the film versions were rather disappointing, which led to reboots in the 2010s.

16 On the innovative aspects of this specific genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 129–150.

Fig. 3: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yön Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:02:00): Park Jungja who has received a “warning” awaits her punishment in public and in front of an expectant audience after being paid an immense sum by New Truth.



Fig. 4: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yön Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:04:40): the three monstrous figures in action, brutally burning down and literally annihilating their victim, while the media watch and film the scene openly.



The resultant shockwave enhances the importance of the event on a national level and beyond. Thus, intimate experiences become the object of sensationalist media coverage (fig. 4). This portrayal encourages reflection on current social questions and the contribution of religious issues to them (as was also the case in the SQUID GAME series).

The Role of New Religious Movements

One of the most fascinating aspects of the series is the specific role it attributes to a new religious movement. Doing so gives reason for a thread that deals with intriguing and popular issues such as secret organizations and their alleged influence in all layers of society. The specific emphasis has much to do with aspects of the East Asian religious landscape, where the emergence of new religious movements and their societal influence – when compared, for instance, to the European context – is an important feature (with Japan and Korea as the most obvious examples).¹⁷ This aspect often

17 For an overview of the situation in East Asia see Pokorny/Winter 2018; Staemmler/Dehn

comes as a surprise to a European audience, but it is part of various East Asian media productions. In Japan the importance and influence of new religious movements is a constant reason for critical reflection, particularly since the terrorist attack of the neo-Buddhist movement Aum Shinrikyō in the Tokyo metro system in 1995.¹⁸ Well-known examples of Japanese productions that take up this theme include the live-action film trilogy *NIJUSSEIKI SHŌNEN* (20TH CENTURY BOYS, Tsutsumi Yukihiko, JP 2008–2009), based on the Japanese manga series of the same name by Urasawa Naoki, published 1999–2006, or the critically acclaimed four-hour movie *AI NO MUKIDASHI* (LOVE EXPOSURE, Sono Shion, JP 2008). In these films, new religious movements are generally portrayed as highly problematic developments, with a sole focus on their harmful influence within and on society, which differs from the plot in *HELLBOUND*. Other important parallel examples are provided by a couple of popular Japanese manga series that came out in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyō incident.¹⁹ They draw on expectable topics such as brainwashing and abduction, but also on sexual misconduct and violence, thereby sensationalizing the character of the fraudulent and evil “cult” leader so popular in media representations (as in the manga series *Charisma* by Shindō Fuyuki, published 2004–2005).²⁰ Other examples intimately explore the motivations of those who join such movements, with a critical position on problematic (economic and social) developments in Japanese society since the 1990s (such as in the challenging manga series *Believers* by Yamamoto Naoki, 1999).²¹

However, *20TH CENTURY BOYS* has the most parallels to *HELLBOUND*, particularly because of its impressive focus on apocalyptic topics: in both series a future end-of-the-world scenario that poses an immediate threat to humankind (either on a more individual level as in *HELLBOUND* or on an all-encompassing level with worldwide floodings and the outbreak of epidemics

2011 (particularly for the situation in Japan); for Korea specifically see Pokorny 2018; Buswell 2018, 449–513.

18 Winter 2016; Repp 1999; Reader 1996; for the impact of this disastrous event and also its relation to the Japanese manga and film industry see Winter 2012, 66–70. The founder of Aum Shinrikyō, Asahara Shōkō (1955–2018), was deeply inspired by manga culture and by specific traits within it, such as the focus on apocalyptic and science-fiction scenarios, which became popular in the 1980s (with the series *Akira* by Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1982–1990, as the best-known example, even on a global level). See also Gardner 2001 and Gardner 2008 for the debate on the alleged harmful influence of manga culture in Japan after 1995.

19 See Thomas 2014, 137–153, for the bigger context.

20 Thomas 2014, 137–139.

21 Thomas 2014, 140–142.

Fig. 5: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 4 (00:03:06): the “second chairman” of New Truth in an Internet clip filmed on the “memorial site” of the “demonstration” of Park Jungja, reminding the audience of the need to repent for their sins.



in 20TH CENTURY BOYS) is the starting point, and a new religious movement profits from the fears triggered by these developments. In the Korean series the emergence of the apocalyptic developments is never explained (and has, so to say, a “divine” origin), while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS it is intrinsically related to the foundation of the new religious movement, whose origins are closely linked to a group of former young friends and the fantastic stories they told each as entertainment.²²

In both cases, the movements are portrayed as problematic, as they are clandestine organizations that develop their own agendas within society by trying to influence political and economic stakeholders (or even by establishing their own political parties). The apocalyptic events serve as a trigger, particularly their flashy and spectacular aspects: in HELLBOUND the public display of a “demonstration” for a victim of the heavenly condemnation is a highlight of the first season, while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS the literal “resurrection” of the supposedly murdered founder of the new movement in a public stadium and in the presence of the global political elite, including the pope (!), is a peak in the plot, as it demonstrates the global importance of the recently emerged movement.

Another contrast can also be noted: in HELLBOUND the plot is complicated by the evolution of a subgroup within the bigger New Truth organization and its setting of an own agenda, distancing itself from the mother group, while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS the group around the mysterious figure referred to as “friend” (*tomodachi*), the search of whose identity is a vital aspect of the series’ plot, remains a unified block.

22 More detailed information on the highly sophisticated plot and its interpretation against the background of major societal changes in Japan from the 1980s onwards is provided in Winter 2018, 208–211.



Fig. 6: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 5 (00:07:43): Public exposure and condemnation of a sinner (who was a gambler) by New Truth.

Also relatively typical, however, is the sensationalist media coverage (figs. 5 and 6). The rather aggressive and intense instrumentalization of all kinds of media in HELLBOUND, in particular the internet and social media, not only by the movement but also by other stakeholders and influential figures in society, is obviously meant as a fierce criticism of contemporary religious phenomena in East Asia. In this regard, once again comparisons can be drawn with 20TH CENTURY BOYS, where the media are implicitly criticized for their sensation-seeking.²³

The aggressive use of a variety of media that is prominently exposed in HELLBOUND is found in Christian churches in South Korea: mega-churches, styled according to their US-American models, actively (and even aggressively) deploy media to proselytize and to gain influence in society.²⁴ Many have been involved in scandals, often the object of sensationalist media coverage in turn, the flip-side of their own aggressive use of the media.²⁵

To Be Continued ...

Due to the success of its first season, HELLBOUND was extended for a second season, due for release in 2023. The project contains material and content that is ripe for further exploration: questions remain unanswered, threads of the plot are still running, and the series ended with a cliff-hanger. But as the series is deemed “mysterious”, perhaps such questions will not yet be answered.

23 Thomas 2014, 144–145, 147, for the plot of the manga series.

24 Kim 2007, 208–213.

25 Lee 2019.

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